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Welcome to Mongolia: From Genghis to Gingrich

David R. Barnhizer
Cleveland State University, d.barnhizer@csuohio.edu

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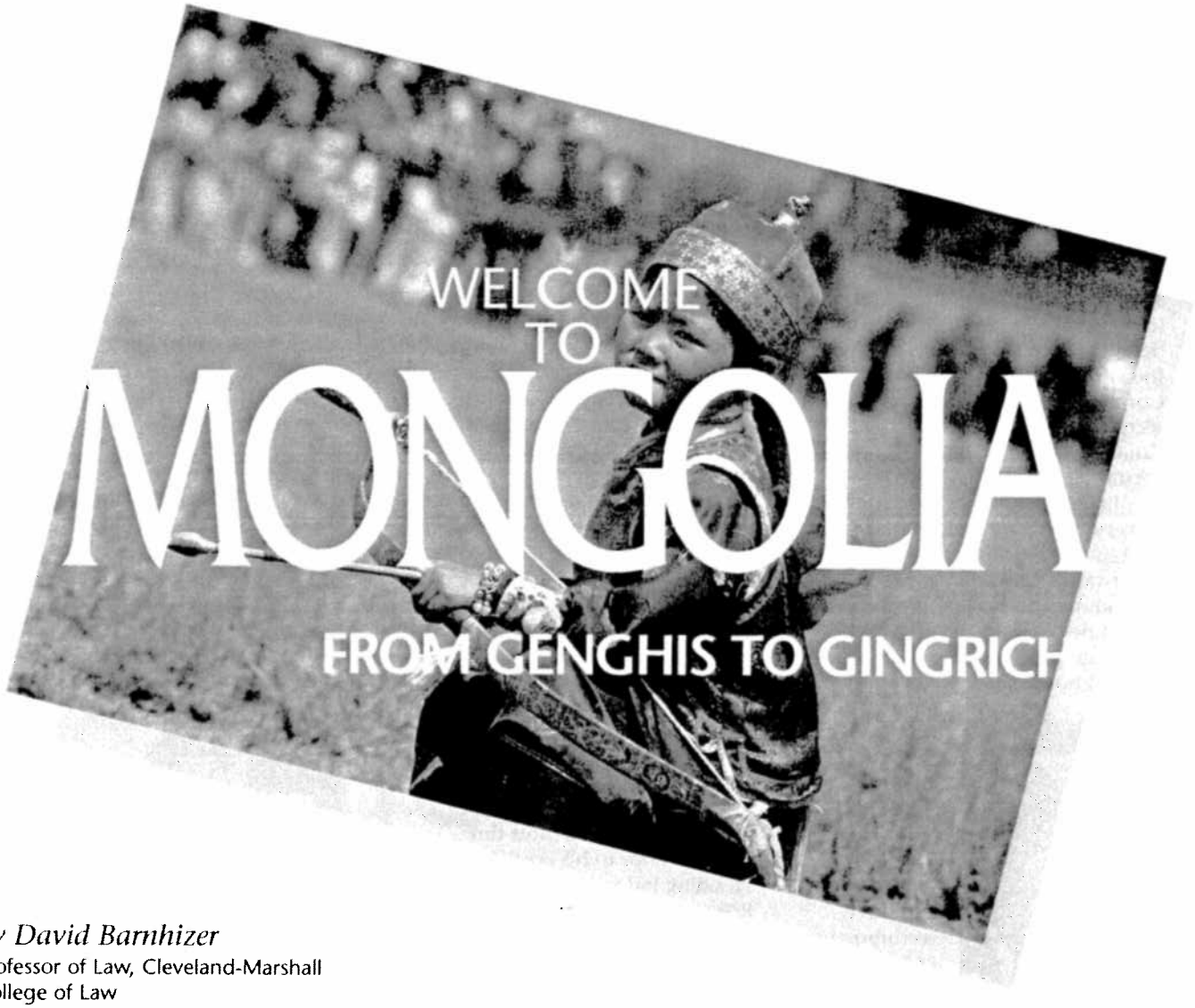

by David Barnhizer
Professor of Law, Cleveland-Marshall
College of Law

My environmental work has increasingly assumed an international dimension, an odd twist in a career that began with civil rights and poverty law, moved into teaching, and now is expanding into international trade and both international and domestic environmental law. The world of international environment and development leads inevitably to travel. My work in the past year has meant Honduras, Portugal, Spain, Ecuador, and Colombia–with Russia and perhaps China, Malaysia, and Thailand looming on the horizon. But last August when I arrived in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, and stood beside the statue of national hero and Marxist liberator Choibalsan, I knew I hadn't been deposited from my clunky Aeroflot flight into the middle of Kansas.

During 1997 and 1998, I was selected to serve as the international consultant to the Mongolian government's MAP-21 program—the Mongolian Action Programme for the 21st Century. The project involves working with a variety of government agencies to help them create the national strategy for sustainable development, combining concerns of economic growth with human and ecological considerations. As part of the work, I was required to travel to Mongolia on two occasions, the first in late summer 1997, the second to be in the spring of 1998 to deliver the final report to the Mongolian government. The project itself is an intriguing mix of law, politics, economics, culture, and social justice. "Sustainable development" is really United Nations shorthand for socially equitable and environmentally sound economic growth.

The time spent in Ulaanbaatar and in the surrounding plains and mountains provided a rare insight into a nation caught in a process of transition from Marxist-planned economy to a Mongolian form of market economy. In such contexts the role of what we call "the rule of law" takes on a degree of significance and quality that is easily overlooked when operating only from within our domestic system. But the full story must wait for a different moment to be told. This essay attempts to provide a flavor of Mongolia, an ancient and mysterious nation in the center of Asia that once sent its Golden Horde to dominate the world.

Ulaanbaatar sounds like a romantic foreign name that must have been around since Genghis but, while the city itself is hundreds of years old, its name means "Red Hero" in honor of Mongolia's Marxist takeover in 1921—a period that ended in 1991 with the disintegration of the

Soviet Union. Genghis Khan's capital was in Karakorum, several hundred miles from Ulaanbaatar, and rubble is all that remains at that site. Visible from everywhere in the modern capital city is a giant monument to Russian soldiers who fought alongside their Mongolian counterparts, not only against the Buddhist masters, if one believes Marxist influenced histories, but against the remnants of the White Russians.

The strangeness that is Mongolia was all around. Sixty percent of the Mongolian population is still nomadic, raising as many as 29 million head of horses, cattle, sheep, and camels on the country's high arid grasslands and sparsely populated Gobi Desert in the south. There are only 2.4 million people in this country that is larger than Alaska. A majority of the population still lives in ghers, the dome-shaped tents of felt and hide that I had always called yurts. UB, as the capital city is usually referred to in short hand, has a population of over 600,000 people living within a vast basin between rounded mountains. Half the population of UB lives in ghers, ringing the city like some enormous tented trailer park. In the winter, the ghers burn dirty coal, and the smoky haze drifts inward to envelop the central city. Only about 10 percent of the country is forested, and tree cover is in isolated dark patches as the firs cluster on the otherwise bare mountain slopes. Most of the terrain is rolling high mountain prairie and about 30 percent is desert. Such a high and arid climate is perfect for preservation, and Mongolia is an absolute treasure trove of dinosaur fossils.

The people are not always the world's friendliest and have much to learn in order to nurture the tourism they strongly desire, but they are tough and courageous.

There are some Tibetan Buddhist temples, primarily open to tourists as museums, but organized religion is not a characteristic of Mongolian culture. Only four percent of the population is Buddhist. When Choibalsan won control of the country at the beginning of the 1920s, he did so by ending a decade of political rule by Buddhists. The Buddhists filled the gap left by Chinese withdrawal in 1911 after hundreds of years of dominance. The main Buddhist monastery and stronghold, which held over a thousand people, was located in beautiful mountains about 40 miles from UB. It was destroyed in 1937 to demonstrate the power of Marxism and its rejection of religion—the peoples' opiate. Ironically, a new temple has been built within a hundred feet of the ruins where cattle graze today. The relationship between China and Mongolia remains a delicate subject and, while most Mongolians do not like the Chinese, they are painfully aware of their extreme vulnerability as a landlocked nation surrounded by China and Russia. This geopolitical reality is an unalterable fact of Mongolian life.

The buildings in UB are largely poorly made Soviet-style design and construction, usually no more than four stories, and either gray or pastel colored stucco which is inevitably peeling. Although there are parks and tree-lined boulevards, the impression is that of disrepair and continual change. The streets of UB are wide, and compared to an American city, relatively sparse. But both drivers and pedestrians are aggressive, and, unless the police are present, there is a continuous dance between walker and driver that at first seems a lot like a game of "chicken."

Nomads' horses graze on the grass in parks and riverbanks no more than a quarter mile from the Great Square. Stooped older people in traditional clothing use handmade brooms of straw or stiff bristles to sweep the streets. Older Chinese and Russian cars and trucks belch diesel fumes in eye-watering clouds. Children pay homage to Michael Jordan on small basketball courts with naked hoops, making the shot at the twisted rims a challenge of the highest order. Near my hotel was an open manhole that was in the midst of the sidewalk, a hazard if you forgot it was there. The lid lay to the side and only after a few days did I realize that people lived in the sewers, particularly abandoned children to whom I started giving little bits of money.

Although Mongolian winters are among the world's coldest, in the warmer months Mongolians are developing an outdoor cafe society with jazz and American popular music heard in many places. Late into the night "lubricated" celebrants regale the city with singing harmony that is actually quite good, sharing the soul of the people with anyone within earshot. Mongolians love to sing even though their songs are often sad and guided by a definite "blues" quality. They even trapped me into it after I contributed several tapes of American music to their library. Abuse of alcohol is an increasing problem in the country. Almost every morning my walk to the government office in which I was working brought the sight of young men aching from the excesses of the evening as they emptied their stomachs onto grassy tree lawns.

The makeup of the people is representative of the many cultures brought into the country by Genghis Khan at the height of the Mongolian Empire. Reflecting the Mongolian origins of Native Americans, many people display visual characteristics found in the tribal population of the U.S. Others are much more Chinese in appearance, although given the many different ethnic groups in China, that can be a misleading description. The people

are diverse in appearance. One striking aspect that doesn't really become conscious until walking around the city for several days, is that there are no overweight Mongolians. There are large Mongolians, small Mongolians, wide and muscular Mongolians, but no fat Mongolians. This is almost certainly a dietary phenomenon. During my speech to government officials and national leaders at the High Level Advocacy Meeting the day before returning to the U.S., I warned them not to continue their negotiations with a well-known American fast food chain, but I am afraid it fell on deaf ears. Soon enough Mongolians will become a new market for Richard Simmons and Jenny Craig.

Mongolians have another highly idiosyncratic characteristic. The people are not always the world's friendliest and have much to learn in order to nurture the tourism they strongly desire, but they are tough and courageous. When they become friends, they are warm and caring. My Mongolian friends and I had a great time out in the countryside, seeing mountains, snakes, marmots, traveling dirt roads twenty miles from anywhere, and eating harhok from a very large communal pot with our hands along with fifteen other members of a Mongolian family. Harhok is traditional Mongolian stew made, in this instance, of a freshly killed sheep cooked in a pressure steamer over a fire of dried horse dung. The stew is also made from marmots, which to me look like very large rats or prairie dogs. I was really happy the harhok I was fortunate to share was sheep since a friend had warned me before the trip that there had been a minor outbreak of plague the prior year attributed to marmots. I concluded that Mongolian cooks are extremely efficient. They cooked and ate everything as either part of the stew or an advance appetizer course cooked inside the gher by the family's grandmother—heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, intestines, slabs of fat, and you will have to guess what else. Somehow I became guest of honor and everything was offered to me first.

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Mongolia is a harsh country that has bred a special kind of person who is simultaneously tough and capable of great warmth and hospitality. At present they are going through a revolutionary transition that began in something rare for most Third World countries—a peaceful end to 75 years of Marxist centrally planned rule and a commitment to shifting to a democratic political system and market economy that still possesses a human compassion. This process began in earnest when the former Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, and the Russians and Eastern Bloc nations withdrew the foreign aid and trading relationships that had conservatively made up 30% of Mongolia's GNP. Mongolians made the commitment to democracy, including crafting "The Contract With Mongolia" after a visit by Conservative U.S. legislators working with Newt Gingrich.

There is a sense of timelessness and scale beyond the mundane when you realize this harsh land gave birth to one of the world's great empires. Certainly, few have left the impact on history of Genghis Khan, who by the way is Chinggis Khan to Mongolians. The country is vast but one of the least populated in the world. There is a raw edge to the culture quickly observed by the way Mongolians treat each other. Although many Mongolians speak Russian, the Mongolian language is unique and to my unfamiliar ear often almost guttural. I became close to the team with which I was working and was treated with great courtesy, but they often seemed as if they were angry with each other. Behavior we would consider rude is commonplace in nearly all their interactions, although a friend told me that they don't even know there is a problem except for the contrast with Americans and Europeans.

There is much more I could write about this fascinating country and my experiences with my Mongolian friends. This could include telling you about how to get through "five vodka lunches" and the secret of "Mongolian TV." But perhaps another time. ■

DID YOU KNOW...

James Thomas '63 is the principal owner of the Sacramento Kings NBA team.